

Will's house
helps
Nancy/Jonathan

Starcourt
Billy's car
how?

Steve
superpowers?



**Best
Laid
Plans**

by Ptera
**art by
kingstoken**

Junkyard
Fight!!!

mews
-
Wheeler House

Best Laid Plans by pterawaters

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Summary:

Dustin Henderson learned from Mr. Clarke that the best way to test a hypothesis is through experimentation. When his newest hypothesis concerns Steve and Steve's uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time, Dustin will stop at nothing to learn the truth.

Best Laid Plans

Author's Note:

This was written for the [2021 Stranger Things Big Bang](#)!

The awesome art was done by [kingstoken](#)!

Big thanks to [diogxnes](#) for beta reading.

Trigger warning for a child (Dustin) in peril (due to his own bad choices, lol).

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As an observer of the knowable universe, Dustin Henderson would like to think he had keen powers of observation. Maybe he didn't always make the wisest decisions with the information he gathered, but wisdom wasn't his highest stat, okay? He was more of an Int sort of fellow, all the way, though he had been improving his charisma score as of late.

So when Lucas said, “Yeah, if Steve had gotten there a second later, we would’ve been dead,” the coincidence of the matter bothered Dustin like a burr stuck to his sock.

See the thing was, whatever had made Steve *sure* he had to return to Starcourt, Dustin hadn’t heard it.

When he asked Erica, she said, “I was paying attention to you and the Bald Eagle man! I can’t pay attention to everything at once.”

“Right, okay,” Dustin said, walking away from her and going back to Lucas’ room.

“Another thing that bothers me,” he said, closing Lucas’ door behind him, “is the fact that we—three teenagers and a ten year old—were able to walk around a secret Russian base for almost an *hour* before anyone noticed us.”

“Why would they be looking for you?” Lucas asked, one paintbrush sticking out the corner of his mouth, the other in his hand as he added detail to his figurine for their new, upcoming campaign. “They were in a secret base. How could they anticipate a ten year old crawling through the ventilation shaft to breach their security? What you guys did was insane.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said, but it still bothered him. Somehow Steve had led them from blind spot to blind spot. Even when they encountered one Russian, Steve had been able to beat him in a fight. If they’d thought to tie that guy up and hide him, they might have gotten out of there completely undetected. “It’s like he’s got a crazy-high modifier on stealth.”

“Who?” Lucas asked, washing out his paintbrush and drying it on a paper towel before dipping it into a new color (dragon green).

“Steve.”

“Steve?” Lucas laughed. “I mean, yeah, he’s kinda cool, but just because he *calls* himself a ninja doesn’t mean you have to go along with his schtick. He’s a normal dude.”

“He fought off those demodogs last year. You saw how he was

ducking and dodging!”

Lucas stopped painting long enough to stare off into space as he considered this. “I suppose a high Dex score is critical to both dodge and stealth.”

Dustin leapt to his feet with a grin. “Ninja!”

Rolling his eyes, Lucas asked, “Why are we talking about this?”

“Wait,” Dustin said, another thought coming to him. “A high Dex score doesn’t compute when we’re talking near-perfect timing of a two-mile drive.”

“What two-mile drive?”

“Between Cerebro and Starcourt,” Dustin explained. “Somehow, just because I couldn’t raise Mike on the radio, Steve knew that they were in trouble. From two miles away.”

“I mean, it’s not a crazy conjecture.” Lucas set his figure down on his desk and took the dry brush out from between his lips. “We were supposed to stay in radio contact. That was part of the plan.”

“You might’ve been going through a tunnel. There was nothing to indicate you were still at the mall, but that’s where he decided to go!”

“High Wisdom score,” Lucas said, leaning forward in his chair and shaking his finger at Dustin, like he was making a point. “Taking the available data from the natural world and *sensing* the correct path. Like how he knew where the demodogs were going last year.”

“Yeah, but ‘sensing’ implies some sort of extrasensory perception.” Dustin laid back on Lucas’ bed. “I mean, it’s not like Steve is like El. He’s not *psychic*.”

“So, he made two lucky guesses,” Lucas said with a shrug. “Everyone rolls a nat-20 on occasion.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Dustin dropped the subject, but it was something that left a lingering doubt in the back of his mind.

~*~

Sitting down at the breakfast table a week after Starcourt exploded, Dustin sighed.

“What’s wrong, Dusty-bun?” his mother asked, setting a plate of eggs down in front of him. “Something got you down?”

“I’m just...” Dusting shrugged, picking up his fork and pushing his eggs around. “I guess I’m worried about Steve. He got hurt pretty badly by the guys who torched Starcourt.”

Frowning, Claudia gave a soft coo. “Oh, that’s right! The poor baby!”

“Maybe after breakfast, I’ll bike over to his house. Check on him.”

“Oh, that would be a good idea.” Claudia pushed a glass of milk closer to Dustin’s plate, always on him to make sure he got enough calcium, like that would make up for the bones he was missing.

To appease her, Dustin picked up the milk and drank a few swallows.

“Do you want to take him some of the cookies I made yesterday?”

Wait. Hold up. “You made cookies yesterday and you didn’t *tell me*?”

“It slipped my mind.” She looked a little hurt.

Shit. “Sorry, Mom. I meant, *thank you* for the cookies. I think Steve would love it if I brought some over. You know how he loves your baking.

Nodding, Claudia said, “You should invite him over for dinner when he’s feeling better. He’s always a pleasant dinner companion.”

“Yeah,” Dustin agreed, giving his mom a smile. “I will.”

Feeling better about the day, and more hopeful that he might be able to prove his theory, Dustin ate his breakfast quickly. He put his dishes in the dishwasher, kissed his mother goodbye, and headed out

on his bike.

By the time he got to Steve's house it was almost ten, so he was surprised when it took Steve almost two minutes to come to the door. When he did, he was wearing just a pair of shorts, and his hair looked like it hadn't been combed yet. "What, Dustin? It's early, man."

"It's *not* early," Dustin insisted, pushing his way into the house. "It's *well* into morning. Also, I have a question for you."

Looking up the stairs toward his room, probably missing his bed or something lame, Steve asked, "Can it wait until later? Or *tomorrow*?"

"No." Dustin put his hands on Steve's shoulders to get him to focus. "This is important. What made you decide to go back to the mall when we were using cerebro?"

"The—the radio thing?" Steve asked, face scrunched up in confusion.

"Yes! We couldn't get Lucas on the radio, and then all of a sudden, you decided to go back to the mall. I need to know why."

"I don't know," Steve told him with a shrug. "They weren't answering. Something had to be wrong?"

"But how did you know to go back to the mall? They were supposed to be long gone."

Steve shrugged again. "The lights at the mall were going crazy. That always means monsters, right?"

"I don't think that's *entirely* accurate," Dustin said. "But I don't have enough data to back that up."

Upstairs, Dustin heard a toilet flush. "Hey! Are your parents finally home?"

"No," Steve said, turning Dustin toward the door and opening it. "I will talk to you later, okay? Like, tomorrow."

"Yeah, okay," Dustin said, and he was pretty sure he caught a

glimpse of a girl's legs walking across the landing at the top of the stairs. Before he could ask if that was Robin or some other girl, Steve pushed him out of the house.

"Bye, Dustin."

"Bye!" he said, as the door closed in his face. Then he remembered the other thing he was going to tell Steve. "Hey, my mom wants you to come over for dinner sometime soon! Give me a call later!"

Dustin didn't get a response, but he didn't really expect one if Steve had a girlfriend over.

So, he picked up his bike and wheeled it down to the street. As he was getting on, he realized that there was a car just like Jonathan's parked across the street. Huh. Weird.

~*~

"What the hell is this?" asked Lucas' voice.

Dustin hadn't noticed him come into the room until he spoke, having been too focused on his thought board. He'd written each separate hypothesis and point of evidence down on index cards, which he taped to the wall with masking tape. *Then*, when it became too difficult to remember which pieces of evidence corresponded to each hypothesis, he started connecting them with push pins and some of his mother's green yarn. Pointing to his feat of intellect, Dustin told Lucas, "This is my thought board."

"What are you having thoughts *about*?" Lucas asked, clearly not following the logic of the board.

"Okay, you have to keep an open mind," he insisted, watching Lucas' face carefully as he processed the request.

Eyebrows raising, Lucas shrugged. "Okay."

“Okay?” Dustin asked, giving Lucas another hard look to be sure.

Lucas nodded.

“Okay!” Dustin said excitedly. He pointed to the card that said, “Eleven.” “We know El has superpowers, right?”

“Right.”

Dustin followed the string to the next card over. “And so does her sister, Kali.”

Lucas interjected, “Number eight.”

“Right. The presence of two of them means the capability for psychic powers isn’t a one-time, El-only deal.”

Lucas scrunched up the right side of his face and said, “I kinda think the fact that she’s number *eleven* was already evidence for that. Like, there’s gotta be at least ten others.”

“They all could’ve been duds,” Dustin argued back. “But they’re not. There’s at least one other with legit superpowers.”

“Cool. Why are you freaking out about this now?”

“*Because.*” Dustin grinned and followed a string to the center of the board. Jamming his finger against the card that said, “Steve,” Dustin told Lucas his hypothesis. “I think Steve is psychic!”

Lucas scoffed. “Steve? Like, Steve Harrington?”

“Yeah!” Dustin eased his finger away from the “Steve” card. “Look at the evidence. He showed up at exactly the right moment to save you guys from being crushed to death by Billy’s car.”

Rolling his eyes, Lucas said, “Coincidence.”

“But how did he know to go back to the mall?” Dustin asked, pointing to another card. “You guys were incommunicado. You could have been anywhere.”

"We were in the last place he saw us!" Lucas cried, throwing his hands wide for emphasis. "It's not that deep!"

"You said you were going to keep an open mind!" Dustin glared at his friend for a long moment, until Lucas backed down.

"Okay," he said, putting his hands up. "What else have you got?"

"Right!" Dustin followed a few of the strings away from Steve's card until he found the one he wanted to talk about. "Here! Last year, when Dart ate Mews, I was trying to get *anyone* to respond. Who just *happened* to come by the Wheeler house when I was there?" Dustin followed the string back to the Steve card, tapping it with his finger. "Steve."

Lucas looked like he was going to argue, but he held back. After a moment of squinting at the board, he asked, "What else?"

"Right. Okay." Dustin started working his way around the board. "He never gets caught by his parents sneaking out. *And* he sneaked us into that Russian base. It took, like, 10 minutes for any of them to see us. What if he unconsciously knew where we should be and when so we wouldn't get caught?"

"But you *did* get caught."

"Eventually! And what about the fact that he showed up at Will's house two years ago, just in time to help Jonathan and Nancy fight the demogorgon? Without him, they would have died!"

Lucas frowned again, but he looked like he might be buying into Dustin's theory the slightest bit. He stepped closer to the board and pointed to the card that said "Junkyard fight." Licking his lips, Lucas asked, "What were you thinking here? The way he seemed like he was half a step ahead of that pack of demodogs?"

Excitement bubbling up in his chest, Dustin said, "*Exactly!* And right after that, he *knew* where the demodogs were going."

"I mean, the lab was a logical guess."

"Was it?" Dustin asked, leaning against the wall next to the board.

“There were tunnels all over town.”

“Hmm.” Lucas took another moment looking over the board before he sighed. “So, you have a hypothesis. How are we going to test it?”

A slow grin spreading over his face, Dustin asked, “You remember Venkman’s experiment on ESP? With the cards?”

His eyebrows jumping up on his face, Lucas asked, “In Ghostbusters? With the electric shocks?”

“I mean, I think we can do it without the negative reinforcement.” Dustin thought about this for a second. “Maybe we’ll keep it as a *Plan B*, but I think just getting him to describe the right card is going to be good enough.”

“If you say so, man,” Lucas said. “If you say so.”

~*~

“So I just try to guess what card you’re holding?” Steve asked, and Dustin could see the skepticism on his face.

“Yeah!” he said, trying to be enthusiastic enough that Steve would go through with the experiment. His back to the wall, Dustin took a card out of the center of the deck and looked at it. Five of Diamonds. “Come on. Just concentrate. It’ll be easy!”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Queen of Hearts.”

“Are you even *trying*?” Dustin scoffed. He put down the five and picked a new card. Jack of Clubs. “Okay, really *concentrate* this time.”

“I dunno,” Steve said, looking over when Mike and Max started arguing over the bowl of chips.

“Focus!”

“Jesus, what does it matter, Dustin?” Steve asked. “Eight of the... the black one. Looks kinda like an upside down heart?”

“A spade?” Lucas asked as he sat down beside Steve.

Steve snapped his fingers. “Yeah, that. Eight of spades.”

Dustin flipped the card around. “Nope.”

“Maybe we need the negative reinforcement,” Lucas suggested, which surprised Dustin. Hadn’t he been the one against— “I’m *kidding*, Dustin. This game sucks. Let’s start the campaign.”

Dustin sighed. “Fine. These conditions aren’t very controlled, anyway.”

“What does that mean?” Steve asked. “I do agree that this game sucks. Like, how could you ever win?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dustin said, not wanting to influence further experimentation. “I’ll keep working on it. Make it more fun before I ask you to play again.”

Steve shrugged. “Sure, man. Sounds good.”

Dustin smiled. He wasn’t quite sure *why* Steve was his friend, but he felt grateful for it anyway.

~*~

Dustin sat next to the extension in his room, staring at it and thinking as hard as he could that Steve should call him. As experiments went, it wasn’t great, since he didn’t have anyone observing Steve, but he had limited resources. If he told anyone except Lucas what he was doing, it could contaminate the experiment. And Lucas had already said no to helping him, so Dustin was on his own.

The card experiment hadn’t worked, but Dustin wasn’t about to give up. It could be that Steve’s psychic ability couldn’t focus on numbers and symbols. Maybe instead, it had to do with more abstract concepts, like feelings. Steve showed up right when people needed him. That meant Dustin had to feel like he really needed Steve for something important.

So Dustin imagined that he was in deep shit with his mom, and that he needed Steve to show up and save him by providing an alibi. Surely that had to be how Steve’s powers worked. Right?

Dustin sat in his room and imagined needing Steve so hard that his head started to hurt from the effort. Or, it could have been the way he was holding his neck muscles tightly. Ow.

In any case, Dustin gave the experiment a good two solid hours before giving up. The phone hadn't rung. Proving Steve's powers was going to be trickier than Dustin thought.

Maybe it was time to consult Mr. Clarke?

No, the last time Dustin had called with a question about superpowers, he'd cited all sorts of studies about why they couldn't be real. It wasn't like Dustin could tell Mr. Clarke about El's superpowers. Not without getting in deep, deep trouble. Damn it. How was he supposed to test his hypothesis? How was he supposed to figure out the truth?

Feeling defeated, Dustin decided to salvage what was left of his Saturday afternoon. He gathered up his things, including the crisp \$5 bill he'd earned raking leaves for Mrs. Gillespie that morning. After saying goodbye to his mother, he got on his bike and rode to the arcade, where Steve worked now.

Steve's familiar car was parked in the corner of the lot and Lucas' and Mike's bikes were already on the rack. As soon as Dustin walked through the door, Steve called out, "Hey! There he is! The man himself!"

Dustin wasn't sure how he did it, but Steve never failed to make Dustin feel awesome. Maybe that was part of his superpowers? Jesus, who was Dustin kidding? Steve didn't have superpowers. Lucas was right, everything was just coincidence.

A smile on his face, Dustin waved. "Hi! What's going on, Harrington?"

"Not much, Henderson," Steve replied, shaking Dustin's hand over the cashier's counter. "Hey, was I supposed to call you today?"

The question surprised Dustin, making him frown. "Not that I can remember? Why?"

"I don't know," Steve said with a shrug. "It kept crossing my brain this afternoon, but Lucas said you were busy today. I must be remembering something else."

Steve got a weird feeling to call Dustin? That meant Dustin's hypothesis was right! He did have superpowers! The experiment wasn't a failure! It had been contaminated by Lucas! Trying not to show Steve just *how* pissed off he was about that, Dustin said, "You know what? I think you should've followed your instincts and called. I wasn't actually doing much. Lucas is just a shithead."

"Why am I a shithead?" Lucas said from right behind Dustin.

Heart stopping, and then shuddering back into rhythm as the shock wore off, Dustin turned around. Giving Lucas one of his mom's polite-but-furious smiles, Dustin said, "Why don't we discuss it outside?"

"Out—"

Grabbing Lucas by the collar, Dustin said, "Outside," and dragged Lucas with him out the arcade door.

"Okay, okay!" Lucas cried, slapping at Dustin's hands. "Let go! Jesus!"

Making sure they were far enough that Steve wouldn't hear him, Dustin hissed, "You contaminated my experiment!"

Lucas tried to play dumb for half a second before a grin spread across his face.

Dustin punched him in the arm. "Asshole!"

"Ow!" Lucas grabbed his arm with his other hand. "Come on, Dustin. You know this is stupid. Steve doesn't have powers."

"Then how come I spent two hours thinking about how I needed him to call me, and the only reason he didn't is because *you* told him not to?" Dustin crossed his arms and frowned at Lucas. "Why did you do that?"

"Look," Lucas said, holding a hand up defensively. "Steve asked why

you weren't here, so I said you were busy. I didn't *mean* to wreck your experiment."

"Hmm." Dustin pressed his lips together and narrowed his eyes at Lucas, trying to gauge his truthfulness. He seemed to be on the level. Holding out his hand, Dustin said, "Sorry I punched you."

Taking his hand and shaking it, Lucas said, "Sorry your experiment didn't work."

"See, but that's the thing." Dustin grinned. "I think it *did* work. I just didn't get results I could record."

Lucas sighed. "Can we save the next experiment for a different day? I think I've finally got the hang of Galaga. A few more quarters and I might be able to make high score."

"Yeah?" Dustin asked, following Lucas back into the arcade. "I'd like to see it."

As he passed the counter, Steve asked, "What the hell was that all about?"

"Nothing," Dustin assured him. "Just a misunderstanding. We're cool. Wanna come watch Lucas make high score on Galaga?"

With a grin, Steve put the bell and the "back in five minutes" sign on his counter and came around onto the arcade floor. "This I've got to see."

~*~

Dustin rolled down the long driveway behind Will's bike, swearing at the heat. When he turned the bend, he saw Steve's car parked next to Mrs. Byers'. "Aw, man! Why didn't you tell me Steve was gonna be here? He could've given us a ride!"

Will shrugged. "I didn't know. Besides," he dismounted from his bike and lifted it, putting it flush against the side of the house, "my mom *just* started letting me bike around again. I want to savor my freedom

before something takes it away again.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Dustin let his bike fall onto the lawn and followed Will into the house.

Inside, they found both Jonathan and Steve standing on the dining room table, doing something to the light fixture above it. Looking up at them, Dustin asked, “What the hell are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Steve said, hunching a little so his head wouldn’t hit the ceiling. “We’re replacing the lamp.” He pointed to a box on the ground.

“Shouldn’t an electrician be doing that?” Will asked.

“Yeah, that’s a good point. You pulled the fuse, right?” Dustin asked them.

“Yes,” Jonathan said, like he was perturbed Dustin thought he might have forgotten. “And it was the right fuse. We checked.”

Turning to Will, Dustin said, “You really should have an electrician put in a circuit breaker instead. They’re way safer. My mom knows a guy.”

“Cool,” Will said flatly, like he was never going to ask.

“Alright, man. Your loss. Just don’t come crying to me when you run out of fuses in the middle of winter and freeze to death.”

Will rolled his eyes and left the room.

Still looking up at the older guys, Dustin asked, “How come you guys are doing this?”

Jonathan shrugged, but Steve said, “Hopper was gonna do it, but...”

“Oh,” Dustin said, suddenly sorry he’d asked. He and his friends had survived the Fourth of July, but not everyone had made it home. Hopper had died. He’d been vaporized, trying to save everyone. He’d died a hero, and Dustin had just reminded everyone of it. “Shit.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve said with a sigh, giving Jonathan a look. “It’s weird thinking about him being gone. I feel like he’s just gonna walk in the door any day now, you know?”

Jonathan reached over and put a hand on Steve’s shoulder, giving him a nod. “Yeah.”

Narrowing his eyes at Jonathan and Steve, Dustin asked, “Wait. Are you guys friends now?”

Jonathan looked to Steve, who stammered, “Y-yeah, sure. Why not?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes, but neither of them said anything further.

Dustin was about to point out that Jonathan had totally stolen Steve’s girlfriend when Will called from down the hallway, “Hey, Dustin! Come on!”

Giving the older kids a silly salute, Dustin said, “See you later, boys!”

Laughing, Steve saluted back. “Bye, man!”

As Will dug through his comic collection, looking for the one he wanted to show him, Dustin thought about what Steve had said. To him, it felt like Hopper was still alive. Was he just saying because that’s what people always said? Or did it mean Steve could sense ghosts?

This was going to take some further investigation, wasn’t it?

~*~

Since Lucas wasn’t being a very good co-conspirator, Dustin decided he needed help from someone who could be trusted. Mike was busy with El and Will all the time, Max wasn’t very science-minded, Robin was too loyal to Steve to be impartial, and Nancy was always busy with Jonathan.

That only left one person he could go to.

Erica.

“*Hell* no,” she told him, leaning out of the front door of her house to talk to him. “Why would I want to do nerd shit like *experiments*? I have better things to do with my time.”

Putting an expectant look on his face, Dustin asked her, “Better than proving Steve has superpowers?”

“Steve?” Erica asked, giving a sharp laugh. “Okay, your hero worship has gone from pathetic to crazy-pants. He doesn’t have super powers! He can barely read!”

Frowning on behalf of his friend, Dustin exclaimed, “Steve can read! I don’t know why people keep saying he can’t!”

Erica blinked at him slowly, making Dustin feel like he was the stupid one. “Maybe it’s because of the things that come out of his mouth.”

“Okay,” he conceded the point. “But that has nothing to do with whether he has psychic powers or not.”

“Oh, *psychic* powers. That’s different!” With a grin, Erica said, “Let me go get my bag.”

“Really?”

Erica’s excited expression vanished in an instant. “No, dipshit. Superpowers are not real, and Steve *Harrington* for sure doesn’t have them.”

“Super—” Confused, Dustin caught the door before Erica could close it in his face. “Hey! You saw El throw that car with her mind! You can’t tell me superpowers don’t exist!”

“I saw no such thing. I have no idea what sort of freak accident of engineering happened to make that car crash inside the mall, but it wasn’t super powers.”

“Yes, it was!”

“I did not see it. It does not exist.”

“And the—”

From inside the house, Mrs. Sinclair called, “Erica? Who’s that at the door? Why are you yelling?”

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Sinclair,” Dustin said, putting on his most polite smile and giving her a wave. “Erica and I were just having a difference of opinion about My Little Pony.”

The confused expression on her face told Dustin his lie was not landing as he’d intended. “Lucas isn’t here. He and Max went to the movies this afternoon.”

“Yes, I know,” Dustin said with a sigh. He knew when he was beat. “Thanks for your time, ladies. I’ll go now.”

Stepping onto the front stoop, Mrs. Sinclair asked, “Is there something wrong, sweetheart? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is *fine*, Mama,” Erica said from behind her, shooing Dustin away with a flick of her hand.

Shaking his head, Dustin told Mrs. Sinclair, “Yeah, no. Everything’s fine. I’m gonna go.”

“Bye,” Mrs. Sinclair said, sounding more confused than anything else. Dustin was used to leaving parents and authority figures confused. It was one of *his* superpowers.

~*~

As Dustin thought more about what he could do on his own to prove that Steve was psychic, he decided to break down the problem. Pacing in his room, he asked himself, “Are there different types of psychic?”

The answer was obvious. “Yes, of course there are.”

But, what type of psychic was Steve? “Telepathy? No. There’s been no evidence for that. What about telekinesis, like El?” Dustin sighed. “No evidence for that either. The ghost thing? Probably untestable. But!” He stopped in front of his thought board. “What about

precognition? That... actually kind of fits, especially if it's subconscious. All these times he showed up *exactly* at the right time. It fits!"

From outside his room, Dustin's mom called, "What's that sweetie?"

"Nothing, Mom!" he replied. "Just talking to myself!"

"Okay!"

When his mom saw the thought board the week before, Dustin had to tell her he was trying to plan out a D&D campaign. Yeah, he was using her ignorance when it came to D&D against her, but it wasn't like the truth was going to fly. She still didn't know that Mews had been eaten by an alien and hadn't just run off and gotten run over or something. Knowing the truth about Steve's possible psychic powers was a slippery slope that would end up with her knowing the truth about everything.

No. It was better this way. Even if he still didn't have reliable help.

Okay. So, *precognition*. What could Dustin do with that? He had to set up a situation where Steve's subconscious knew that something was going to happen, and that he needed to stop it. There had to be as little room for human error as possible. Hmm.

What about...?

Would Steve be able to intercept a message? Like a letter or something? His subconscious would have to have motivation to stop the message from reaching its target. And it had to be a message Steve was capable of intercepting, so Dustin couldn't send something to, like, Nancy or the cops or something. Hmm.

Oh! What if Dustin sent a letter to Steve's parents? It would have to contain something bad enough that it might affect Steve's living situation. Get him kicked out. Otherwise, how could Dustin be sure that Steve's precognition would actually see the letter as a threat and make Steve intercept it?

Dustin had a few secrets he knew Steve wouldn't want his parents to know.

This did present a bit of a moral question. Those things were told to Dustin in confidence. Using them for his experiment could be considered a breach of trust. Then again, wouldn't Steve *want* to know that he had psychic powers? Dustin couldn't outright tell him. Steve having that information would contaminate the experiment. No, the only way to avoid bias and get to the truth was to leave Steve in the dark.

On that note, Dustin realized that the letter would have to be anonymous. Hmm, Steve had seen enough of Dustin's handwriting that he might be able to recognize it. Dustin was going to have to use his mom's typewriter. Luckily, the old D&D campaign excuse would come in handy again. He could just tell his mom that he needed to make handouts for the players.

Also, there had to be a big enough sample size for the experiment to work. Earlier that summer, Dustin had read the book about statistics and the scientific method that Mr. Clarke had lent him. Dustin had devoured the book and given it back, but he still remembered the gist of it. To disprove the null hypothesis, namely that Steve would intercept the letter just by chance, Dustin would have to repeat the experiment several times. At least three, maybe more.

That meant at least three letters, each mailed on random days of the week, and spaced far enough apart that Steve wouldn't be able to anticipate them. Well, Dustin knew a perfect way to randomize a set. Grinning, he opened his backpack and pulled out his dice bag.

~*~

Dustin was halfway through the new *The Uncanny X-Men* comic when his bedroom door slid open with a bang. Startled, he looked up to see Robin standing in the doorway, a piece of paper in her hand and a wild look in her eyes. "I know this was you!"

"What was me?" Dustin asked, carefully closing the comic book to avoid creasing the pages.

Robin unfolded the paper in her hand and read, "Dear Mr. Harrington, I thought you should know that your son Steven was the one who put the dent in your Porsche..." With every word Robin

read, Dustin's stomach sank. "... during the summer of 1978. He and his friend were practicing baseball swings in the garage on a rainy day and hit it by accident. Sincerely, A Concerned Citizen."

Flustered, Dustin said, "W-why would I send a letter like that?"

"I don't *know*," Robin told him, stomping closer and looming over him. "But Steve said the only people who know about that story are him, Tommy H., and *you*."

Dustin thought about deflecting the blame onto Tommy, but he couldn't help but be curious if his experiment had worked. "What happened with the letter? Did Steve get in trouble?"

"You are damn lucky that Steve wasn't wearing his reading glasses and opened the letter by mistake. Otherwise his dad would've read it and probably would have kicked him out of the house."

"Steve intercepted it?" Dustin asked, a grin spreading across his face. That was one data point of the set.

Robin smacked Dustin's shoulder. "What sort of game are you playing here, Henderson? Steve's your friend! Why would you do this to him?"

"I didn't!" Dustin lied.

Robin smacked him again.

"Ow! Stop that!" Dustin scrambled off his bed and held up his hands to better fend off Robin's attacks. "It wasn't me!"

"Why would Tommy H. send this letter? He and Steve haven't spoken for two years."

"I don't know! Maybe he misses the attention? What if this is a cry for help?"

"Is it?" Robin asked, giving him a hard, narrow-eyed look. "Is it a cry for help, asshole?"

Okay. Denial wasn't getting him anywhere and it looked like Robin

was about to hit him again, so he put his hands in front of his face, tightly closed his eyes, and cried, "Wait!"

"Wait, what?"

When Dustin peeked over at Robin, she had her jaw clenched and her fist raised. "I can explain."

"Then *explain!*"

Feeling a little less defensive, Dustin lowered his hands. "You know, you are a really great fr—"

"Dustin!"

"Fine!" Dustin stepped over to the wall and unhooked the Empire Strikes Back sheet he'd been using as a wall-hanging-slash-privacy-device. Lowering the sheet, he showed Robin his thought board. "I'm trying to prove that Steve has psychic powers."

"Psychic what now?" Robin asked with a confused frown, stepping closer to the thought board and starting to read it.

"Powers," Dustin insisted. "More specifically, precognition. He knows things before they're gonna happen. Subconsciously, of course."

Sarcastically, Robin echoed, "Of *course*."

Watching Robin read everything on the board was like letting her see into his soul. Feeling more than a little exposed, Dustin asked Robin, "Don't tell him, okay? Please? If he knows about the experiment, it's going to contaminate the results."

Shoving the letter into his face, Robin said, "And getting him kicked out of his house *isn't*?"

"The letters had to be sufficiently damaging," Dustin explained, throwing up his hands when Robin tried to smack him again. "It was the only way to be sure!"

"*Letters?* Plural?"

“I needed enough data points to—”

Robin slugged him in the arm.

“Ow!”

“How many letters are there?” She demanded, poking the front of Dustin’s shirt, making him back up against the thought board. Dustin could feel at least three push-pins digging into his back.

Realizing that Robin meant business, and really not wanting to explain that a girl had given him bruises, Dustin admitted, “Only two. I was planning on sending the third on Friday.”

“Jesus, Dustin! If I find out you sent any more letters, I swear, I’m gonna do something so horrible, you’re gonna wish you were never born.”

“Shit.” Dustin sighed before giving Robin a look he hoped would make her relent and continue. “Don’t you think Steve will want to know? We’d be doing him a favor.”

“I will kill you,” she said, and for the first time that afternoon, Dustin began to get the sense that she was serious. “*Slowly.*”

“Jesus, okay!” Dustin cried. “I won’t send any more letters.”

Robin gave Dustin a hard look. “And you’ll stop trying to prove this crazy theory?”

“It’s a hypothesis, and it’s not cr—”

“Dustin!”

Closing his eyes, Dustin knew that he had to play along, and make Robin believe it, or else he was going to have to explain a black eye, and maybe *worse*. “Fine,” he told her with a disappointed sigh. “Fine. I’ll stop. I won’t send any more letters.”

Robin took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she stepped back, letting Dustin go. “Okay. Good.” She looked over Dustin’s shoulder at the thought board behind him. “It’s...” She squinted and looked at

one of the cards closer. “Huh.”

“Right?” Dustin asked, starting to get excited that Robin might let him continue with the experiment. “There’s just so much evidence, but it’s all circumstantial!”

“As compelling as the theory might be,” Robin told him, looking Dustin straight in the eyes, “it’s not worth losing your friends over. Got it?”

Shit. He had to admit that she had a point. “Got it,” he said, already thinking of methods he could implement that *wouldn’t* lose him any friends. “Loud and clear.”

~*~

While Robin had some good points, Dustin wasn’t ready to give up completely. He *knew* he was right. If he could just *prove* it, then everyone else would have to admit it. What he had to do now was start back at square one. So, what did he know?

Dustin knew that the most compelling anecdotes proving Steve’s powers had happened when someone he cared about was in danger. Showing up at Jonathan’s house to protect Nancy, showing up at Nancy’s house to meet up with Dustin and protect him from the demodogs, showing up at the mall to protect Lucas and everyone else from Billy. All these incidents had that in common.

Now, since it wouldn’t be ethical to put someone in danger without their knowledge, he could only do this experiment with a willing volunteer. Since Robin, Erica, and Lucas had all dismissed Dustin’s efforts to prove his hypothesis, he was either going to have to get Nancy to volunteer — which was probably the *longest* long shot he could think of — or *Dustin* was going to have to be the volunteer.

But who was going to agree to put Dustin in danger?

He could do something like pick a fight with Troy the next time he saw the guy at the arcade, but that seemed too difficult to control. It had too many variables to be a good experiment. This had to be a type of danger that Dustin could *control*.

However, if he had too much control over the danger he put himself in, if he could abort the experiment whenever he wanted to, it wouldn't be a good test of the hypothesis. He wouldn't *actually* be in danger. Not in a way that would matter to Steve's precognition. It wasn't like Steve showed up every time Dustin was about to trip over his own feet. No, this had to be real, life-threatening danger.

Now, Dustin wasn't suicidal or anything. He didn't want to die, therefore he needed to think of a danger mechanism that took a *while* to become deadly. Something like... starvation.

No, that wouldn't work. Dustin looked down at his belly and poked it with his finger. It would take *too* long for him to die of starvation. Weeks, probably. Maybe longer.

Suffocation? Hmm, that seemed like it would be difficult to calibrate correctly. Or, he'd be fine until the oxygen ran out, and then he'd be dead. *That* wasn't optimal.

If starvation was going to take too long, and suffocation wasn't going to take long enough, that left one obvious method in the middle: dehydration.

Since it was summer, dehydration would be achievable without too much effort, especially if he was somewhere that wasn't air conditioned. It would also have to be somewhere that none of his other friends would think to look for him. In order for the experiment to prove the hypothesis, *Steve* had to be the person who found Dustin, and he had to find Dustin using only his psychic powers, not deduction or anything like that. It would have to be remote enough that if he started screaming or something, no one would hear him, and no one would stumble across him by accident.

Okay, so he had to scout out a new location without leaving any evidence. He could do that.

Next steps were... Well, the next step would be to engineer something at that location that would prevent him from escaping and ending the experiment early, without *also* making it impossible for anyone to get to him. That meant restricting his own movement somehow. Tying himself up? How would *that* work? How could he

guarantee that he'd be unable to free himself? It would have to be some sort of locking mechanism. Something that, once he started it, there was no way to stop it.

Could he lock himself in some sort of cage? Put the key out of reach before locking himself in? Hmm, but was that *too* simple? What if he found a way to break the lock? He wouldn't actually be in life-threatening danger. Hmm.

This was going to take some thought. And a little more research.

Taking his pad of paper and a pen with him, Dustin went to the phone and dialed the number for the Hawkins Public Library.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Delores. This is Dustin Henderson. I have a quest—"

The phone clicked and then the dial tone started.

"She fucking hung up on me!"

The nerve of some people! Dustin was just a student, looking for information. If Delores couldn't handle that, she shouldn't have become a librarian.

The next number Dustin dialed, that of Mr. Clarke, he also knew from memory. It rang three times before Mr. Clarke picked up.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Clarke! Dustin Henderson here."

"Dustin! How has your summer been? Are you excited to start ninth grade in a few short weeks?"

"You know, just so excited," Dustin answered impatiently. "Hey, you don't know how long it would take a person to die of dehydration, would you?"

Mr. Clarke hummed thoughtfully. "You know, I suppose it would depend on the conditions. Temperature and humidity."

“Naturally.”

“What’s this for?”

“A campaign,” Dustin lied easily. “The characters are trapped in a desert fortress, and I just need to know what their survival timeline looks like.”

Sounding delighted, Mr. Clarke said, “That is a very interesting question. I’m afraid I don’t know the answer off the top of my head. This might require a bit of research.”

“I tried calling the library, but Delores hung up on me.”

“Yes, well.” He sounded like he was trying not to laugh. “You know, the public library as an institution has to look down on the *theft* of books.”

“That was *one* time, and I brought them all back!” Jesus, did no one in this town understand how important knowledge was? “Anyway, what would you guess in a hot environment with no water? A day? Two? Five?”

“I’d think somewhere between two and five, unless a lot of physical activity would be involved. Will the party be trying to escape the desert on foot?”

“They’ll be trapped in a temple—” or at least, that was the closest scenario Dustin could think of “—so physical activity will be fairly low.” Oh, man. That made it sound like he was going to TPK for the hell of it. “I mean, they’ll need to solve a puzzle to escape, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Mr. Clarke replied. “If I was you, I’d give each player a pool of five dehydration points. They’d lose one or more per day, depending on how much running around they’d need to do.”

“That is a very wise plan of action, sir! That’s just what I’ll do. Thank you for your help!”

“Of course! Anytime!”

After hanging up, Dustin grinned to himself. Oh, yeah. This time it was going to work.

~*~

By the last week before school was set to start, Dustin was ready to set his plan into motion. He'd scouted out a site — an abandoned body shop out on the highway out of town — and he'd moved everything he needed to set his plan in motion. While he'd thought about starting his plan in the morning, Dustin came to the conclusion that evening was a better time to implement his plan. First of all, he'd have three meals on board, which meant he wouldn't get hungry or dehydrated as quickly. Second of all, his mom would notice he wasn't home much sooner than if he didn't come home for lunch. Dustin had lunch with his friends more often than not during the summer. If his mom called Steve looking for him, Steve would know to follow his psychic hunches about where to find Dustin, and not ignore them.

Dustin wasn't suicidal, after all.

Yeah, this plan was going to work.

So, he relieved himself one last time into the woods behind the building and then went inside. There were two doors into the building, so Dustin made sure both worked and weren't locked or rusted shut or anything. Next he set up his cage. He'd built it out of scrap from the junkyard, and secured it with locking bolts that he'd tightened as much as he could. Without a pair of wrenches, there was no way to get the walls of the cage apart.

There were two last pieces of the trap. The first was a bar that went across the door. On one side, it locked into a repurposed trailer coupling that he'd fastened with a heavy-duty gear clamp to the support pillar of the shop. On the other side, the bar went into a clamp that had a locking pin to keep it in place. The locking pin was out of reach when Dustin was in the cage, meaning he couldn't undo it by himself once it was locked in place. The second was a heavy padlock that he fastened around where the door met the wall of the cage. Dustin took the key out of the lock and threw it across the empty shop.

There! Now he was stuck and in need of rescue!

He was glad he'd thought ahead and outfitted his cage with a few cushions and a stack of comic books. Now all he had to do was wait.

~*~

To say it had been the worst year of Steve Harrington's life was something of an understatement. Things just kept seeming to go from bad to worse. The bad shit had started the previous November and had just seemed to keep snowballing from there, hitting an apex on July 4th, 1985.

The thing was... it had also been the best year of his life.

His break-up with Nancy led to him not finishing his college applications on time, which had led to not getting in anywhere. But, Dustin had kind of become his best friend. Billy Hargrove had kicked his ass and taken his place in school. But, since no one else would hang out with him, he'd spent a lot more time with Nancy and Jonathan. His dad had cut him off and made him get a job, but he'd met Robin there and become really good friends with her. He'd gotten captured and interrogated by Russian secret agents, but he'd also helped save the world.

So when he got a call from Mrs. Henderson at ten o'clock at night saying Dustin was missing, he figured it was just time for something shitty to happen again. He hung up the phone, turned to Nancy and Jonathan, and told them, "We've gotta go find Henderson. His mom doesn't know where he is. She called around everywhere, but no one's seen him all day."

"Shit," Nancy said, reaching for her shoes and putting them back on. "He couldn't be with Robin or something, could he?"

Steve shrugged. "I'll check." He dialed Robin's house, apologized to her mother for calling so late, and got Robin on the phone. "Have you seen Dustin at all today?"

"No. I haven't," Robin said, her voice full of worry. "What do you think happened to him?"

"I don't know." Steve's worry skyrocketed. "Hey, I'll come get you in like twenty minutes. We'll go look for him."

"See you then," Robin said, hanging up the phone.

Turning to Nancy and Jonathan, he said, "Let's split up and check all the places we can think of."

"I'll write down a list," Nancy said, taking a pad of paper out of her purse. "Jonathan and I can take one half of the list, you and Robin can take the other."

Steve nodded. "Let's do it quick, though. There's no telling what sort of trouble Dustin is in."

"Should we ask anyone else?" Jonathan asked. "I'm sure Mrs. Henderson called around looking for him, but maybe his friends didn't want to rat on him?"

Nodding, Nancy said, "You and I can check with our brothers, and Lucas, since he's next door to mine." Looking up at Steve, Nancy winced, "Can I ask you to check the junk yard? It's kind of out of the way for us."

"Robin and I are on it."

By the time he'd scrounged up a few flashlights and his bat (just in case), Nancy gave him a list of a half-dozen more places to check. One last idea came to mind. He took a pair of walkie-talkies out of his closet, along with a few packs of fresh batteries. He turned on the walkie-talkies and made sure they were on the same frequency before handing one to Jonathan. "Stay on channel five. Let us know if you find him, so we aren't searching all night for nothing."

Jonathan took the walkie-talkie and the pack of batteries Steve handed him. "Be safe, alright?"

Steve pulled him into a one-armed hug. "You, too."

After a few goodbye kisses for both of them, Steve left to go pick up Robin. He had a really bad feeling about the night, and the whole way over to Robin's house, he prayed that he was wrong.

~*~

By midnight, Steve and Robin had searched the entire Family Video/Arcade building and the school, and they were halfway through searching the junkyard. The radio on his belt hissed, before Jonathan's voice said, "Steve?"

Steve took the radio off his belt and pressed the button to talk. "Yeah, Johnny? What've you got?"

"Will and Mike have no idea where he is, but Lucas said..."

Why was Jonathan hesitating? They didn't have time for this! "What? He said what?"

Nancy's voice came over the radio. "Lucas says Dustin has this insane theory that you're psychic. He's been trying to prove it for weeks."

"Psychic?"

"Oh, shit," Robin said, hurrying over to Steve and grabbing the radio from his hands. "I told him to knock it off! He promised me he would stop! Is Lucas sure?"

"You *knew* about this?" Steve asked, frowning when Robin waved him off, holding the radio close to her ear.

"Lucas is pretty sure," Nancy replied. "He says Dustin has a thought board up in his room that might have some clues. We're going to bring him over there now. You guys keep looking, okay?"

"Okay," Robin said, letting the radio drop away from her ear. She looked over at Steve with deep worry on her face. "I should have known that little shit wasn't going to drop this."

"He really thinks I'm... psychic?" Steve asked, shining his flashlight into the broken-down bus. "Why?"

Robin shook her head as she stood next to him, shining her flashlight around. "I don't know. He thinks it can't be coincidence how many times you've been in the right place at the right time."

Steve ducked to look under the school bus seats, but didn't see anything. "If anything," he told Robin as he took his head out of the bus, "I'm always in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Robin sighed, rubbing her arms like she was cold. "I don't think he's here."

"Yeah," Steve said, looking under a rusted out car, just to be sure. "I bet he was trying to do something and got himself kidnapped. Locked up somewhere we're never gonna find him."

As they got back to Steve's car, Robin said, "Well, we could always give the psychic thing a try."

"Yeah, but I'm not psychic." Steve got into the car and closed the door behind him. He put his hands on the steering wheel and closed his eyes. "Since it couldn't *hurt*... come on, brain. Where is Dustin?"

Steve tried to focus, tried to think up where Dustin could be, but every time he tried, he kept focusing on the sound of his key chain swinging back and forth, the links of the chain rubbing against one another. He sighed. "I don't know. What's the next place on our list?"

Robin turned her flashlight back on and took Nancy's list out of her pocket. "The quarry."

"Let's go to the quarry."

~*~

"Oh, my god," Nancy said when Lucas pulled the Star Wars sheet down from Dustin's bedroom wall, revealing something akin to the board Murray Baumann had put together while he was investigating Barb's disappearance. Note cards were arranged in a loose pattern, connected with string in a way that made no sense to Nancy, though she was sure it made sense to Dustin. She skimmed over the contents as quickly as she could, looking for anything that might be a reference to where they might find Dustin.

"What about this?" Jonathan asked from the other end of the wall. He pointed to a card that said, "Trap machine."

Nancy took a quick look at the cards around it, reading them as she pointed to them, “Abandoned location, dehydration, padlock, cage, crossbar, open outer doors, entertainment.” Looking around at the others, Nancy asked, “What the hell?”

“I think I might be able to translate,” Lucas said, holding out his hand to Jonathan. “Lemme tell the others what to look for.”

“Sure,” Jonathan said as he passed over the radio.

Lucas pressed the button and asked, “Are you guys there?”

“Yeah, here,” Robin answered right away.

Lucas sighed and then told them, “Dustin has trapped himself somewhere. An abandoned location, probably. I’m sure he’s counting on Steve being able to find him before he dies of dehydration. God, I knew he was dumb, but I didn’t think he’d ever do something like *this*.”

“None of us thought he would,” Robin replied. “I guess we start searching every abandoned location we can think of.”

“You guys take the East side of town, we’ll take the West?” Lucas asked, looking to Nancy, who nodded her agreement.

“Yeah, okay,” Robin said over the radio. “Good luck, you guys.”

Taking back the radio, Jonathan said, “You, too.”

Lucas scoffed and turned away, saying under his breath, “Can’t believe I’m friends with such a moron.”

Nancy kept close to Jonathan as they left Dustin’s house, assuring his mom they would try their best to find him. Before they got back to the car, Nancy squeezed Jonathan’s arm and asked, “You don’t think Dustin might be right, do you?”

“No. Of course not,” Jonathan said, but there was something uneasy in the way he met her eyes.

“Yeah, me neither,” Nancy replied as they reached the car. “Dustin’s

seeing patterns where there aren't any."

"I'm gonna show him the pattern of *my fist* when we find him," Lucas said, getting into the back of the car. Nancy hid her laugh at his comment, biting her lip and taking shotgun.

~*~

Steve had driven out to the quarry in the dark more than a few times since getting his license. It served as a good alternate make-out place when his parents were home for the night. At least it had, until Hopper'd gotten killed and that asshole Callahan had been appointed acting Chief. He had the cops chase off parking teens at least once every night, sometimes twice on weekends. It sucked.

If Dustin had gone to the quarry, where would he have trapped himself? There weren't any abandoned buildings, so he'd have to be out in the open. Wouldn't one of Callahan's goons have found him by now?

That's when Steve noticed a break in the trees lining the road. He let his foot off the accelerator and slowed down as they approached the old building. Steve knew he'd seen it before, probably at least a hundred times. He'd just never paid it any attention because it had been abandoned as long as he could remember.

"Steve?" Robin asked from beside him. "What are we...?"

Steve pulled off the road and onto the broken drive that ran in front of the building. It looked like an old gas station or body shop, and there were as many weeds growing out of the drive as there were patches of still-intact asphalt. Steve winced at the sound of a particularly tough weed scratching his bumper when he plowed over it and then parked.

"Steve?"

"This place looks pretty abandoned, doesn't it?" Steve asked, looking through the windshield. "That's what Nancy said, right? He was probably in an abandoned building."

"Yeah, but we're in the middle of the Rust Belt," she said, and Steve

vaguely recognized the phrase. “There’s abandoned buildings *everywhere* in Hawkins. How do we know he’s in this one?”

“We don’t,” Steve told her, “but it won’t hurt to take a look.” He got out of the car, taking his flashlight and bat with him.

“Ha! That’s what people in *horror* movies say.”

Ducking down to look at Robin through his still-open door, Steve asked, “Are you coming, or not?”

Robin scrambled out of the car, taking her own flashlight and the walkie-talkie with her. “Are you *insane*? Being left alone in the car gives a person worse odds than sticking together and entering a creepy, abandoned building.”

Steve wasn’t sure that was *entirely* true, but he knew better than to argue with Robin about statistics and probability. She got all As in math, and Steve had barely graduated. “Come on,” he told her, pointing his bat toward what looked like a door. “Stick close.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.”

Robin followed on his heels as Steve walked toward the building. There was what *looked* like a front door, but when Steve got there, he didn’t see any door handles. Was this just a window, maybe? Steve shone his flashlight through the window, but it was so dirty, he couldn’t really see anything on the inside.

“Psst,” Robin hissed at him. When Steve shone his flashlight on her, she waved him to the corner of the building. “I think this is a door over here.”

Steve turned the corner and found the door Robin was talking about. He grabbed the handle and turned, expecting it to be locked. The mechanism crunched like it was rusty, but it unlatched and pulled open, swinging out with a loud squeal of the rusty hinges. As the sound of the door faded, Steve stood in the doorway, listening. He took a sharp breath and told Robin, “I think I hear something shuffling in here.”

“Something like a wild animal, or something like Henderson?” she

whispered back, her hand hooked on his left elbow like she needed to be sure that they wouldn't lose track of each other.

"I don't know," Steve said, trying to listen again. This time all he heard was the beating of his own heart. Figuring he'd better find out whether Dustin was in here, dead or alive, Steve took a step inside. He shone his flashlight around for a second before a voice startled the crap out of him.

"Don't come any closer! I have a gun!"

Steve might've actually shit his pants, if he hadn't recognized the voice and its nervous tremble.

"Henderson," Steve said with a sigh of relief, taking a few more steps into the abandoned building. "Where are you?"

"Steve?" he replied, and Steve followed his voice. "Oh, my god! You did it! You actually found me! It hasn't even been twelve hours since my mom would've missed me! I *knew* you had superpowers! I just knew it!"

Steve found Dustin in some sort of metal cage. There was a padlock on the front of it, as well as a complicated series of bars and parts that looked like some sort of medieval locking system. Behind him, Robin said into the radio, "Hey, Nancy. We found him."

Sighing, Steve stepped up to the door of the cage. "You know what? You're an asshole," Steve told him. "We were worried about you, and you fucking did this to yourself!"

Dustin's face fell and he looked around, like he couldn't understand why Steve was pissed. "But... My experiment *worked*."

"Oh, you mean this here?" Steve said, pointing around at the complicated machine of junk he'd constructed around himself. "This isn't an experiment! This is a death wish!"

Jutting out his chin, Dustin told him, "It wouldn't have worked if I wasn't in real danger. You would've ignored it, like you've done with all my other experiments."

Rage bubbled up in Steve's throat. "*Other* experiments?! Just how long have you been experimenting on me, Dustin?!"

His resolve wavered and he pressed close to the door of his cage, putting one hand between the bars, like he was trying to grab him. Steve took a step back, and Dustin's face fell even further. "I... I did this *for* you, man! You're always talking about how you're nothing special, and anyone could take your place and things would be the same. I wanted to show you that's not true! You're special! Just like El!"

"Say I believe you," Steve said, pointing at Dustin. "Say you're right, and I am special. How the hell could you even *consider* putting yourself in danger for my sake? You're acting like if you died anyone could take your place and things would be the—" Steve's voice stuck in his throat. "— the *same*. It wouldn't be, okay? It wouldn't!"

The wide-eyed astonishment on Dustin's face made Steve think that he'd gone a little overboard, but then he shook his head. "Jesus, when you put it that way..."

Robin squeezed Steve's shoulder and asked Dustin, "How do we get you out of here, anyway?"

Pointing, Dustin said, "Well, I threw the key over that way. And this bar, you need to press the spring-loaded locking pin over there, then lift it up."

"Of course you would build something like this," Steve said, feeling equal parts frustrated and fond. He handed Dustin his flashlight. "You point this, I'll get the locking pin. Robin, the key?"

"Sure," she said, starting to search the floor.

Steve followed where Dustin was pointing the flashlight and looked at the mechanism for a second. He saw the pin that went through the clasp, locking it in place, but when he pushed on the pin, it didn't budge. "Um," he said, looking back at Dustin. "This thing isn't moving."

"It's not?" Dustin asked, and Steve recognized the worried tone in his

voice. "I greased it and I tested it. Are you sure you're pressing hard enough?"

"If I press any harder, I'm gonna break my finger."

"Found the key!" Robin said, undoing the padlock and taking it off the door of the cage. She pulled in the door, but it was still held in place by the cross-bar. "What's the hold up?"

"This thing won't come undone," Steve told her. He backed up to let Robin get a look at it.

She shined her flashlight all around the lock, pushed at the pin, and found it just as stuck as Steve had. "Shit."

"Guys? What's going on?"

"You built too good a trap," Steve told him, going back to the cage and taking a look at it. "Where are the wrenches you used to put this together?"

"At...home," Dustin said, sighing with defeat and sitting down in his cage. "I really thought it was going to be easier for you guys to get me out."

Steve crouched down to put himself on Dustin's level. "If I was really psychic, I would've thought to bring some tools."

Dustin chuckled. "Yeah, I guess so." Then he took a sharp breath and added, "I'm still 80% sure you're subconsciously psychic, but I'm done with experiments now. I promise."

Robin sat down next to Steve. "Jonathan has some tools. He and Nancy are bringing them."

"Great," Steve said, sitting down on the dusty workshop floor. "We'll get you out of there sooner or later, even if we have to call the fire department and have them cut you out."

"Ooh, I'd rather not," Dustin said with a wince. "My mom has a crush on Petey Howard, and he's one of the volunteer firefighters. If Petey had to cut me out of here, I'd never hear the end of it. She'd be

gushing about how he saved my life for *decades*.”

Steve laughed, because yeah, he could see that.

“Don’t worry,” Robin told him, leaning closer to the cage, “your secret’s safe with us.”

~*~

By the time Jonathan and Nancy showed up, and everyone worked together to get the side off the cage so Dustin could escape, he noted that he’d been trapped in there for a little over eleven hours. The early-morning sun came in through the dirty warehouse windows. “Thanks, everyone,” Dustin told them, giving hugs all around. “I guess I should get home and face the music.”

“I’ll take you,” Steve said, putting his heavy hand on Dustin’s shoulder. Then he asked Jonathan, “Will you guys take Robin home, and then I’ll meet you...” He did some sort of gesture that Dustin didn’t understand, but Jonathan nodded his head.

Nancy said, “See you there.”

When Dustin got in Steve’s car and closed the door, he asked, “Since when have you been talking with Nancy again? And Jonathan? And now you’re meeting them someplace?”

“None of your business,” Steve replied, though there was a pleased sort of smirk in the corner of his mouth that Dustin didn’t quite understand. “Worry about how much your mom is gonna kill you for making her worry all night.”

Terror crept up the back of Dustin’s throat. “Shit. Did you guys tell her anything yet? Maybe we can just say it was an *accident*? I accidentally trapped myself in there?”

Steve sighed and pulled out of the broken-asphalt driveway and onto the road. “I suppose *maybe* we can tell her that. *If* you promise to stop doing dangerous shit on your own.”

Pouting, Dustin said, “No one else wanted to help me.”

“Maybe you should take that as a sign, huh?” Steve gave Dustin a *look* before looking back at the road. “If other people don’t want to help you, maybe they’re seeing the danger you’re not.”

“Better wisdom scores,” Dustin replied sagely. “I still think it’s almost astronomically impossible for everything about you to be coincidence. You ‘just happen’ to show up in the right place at the right time way too often, you know?”

Steve fell silent for a moment before saying, “Or maybe it seems like that to you, because you and I notice different things. It’s not magical superpowers, I swear to god.”

“If you say so,” Dustin said, just to make Steve happy.

Now he knew that it was too dangerous — and frankly, unethical — to continue with controlled experiments, he would have to fall back onto another method: the observational study. If he made enough observations and kept meticulous notes, he might be able to statistically prove that Steve knew things he shouldn’t have been able to know. Of course, observational studies were notoriously difficult to use to prove *causation*, but even an association without causation might appease Dustin’s curiosity.

Yeah, that could work!

Author's Note:

Thank you so much for reading! I'd love to hear what you thought in the comments!

If you want to learn more about me and my fan works, you can find me [on tumblr](#). You can also learn more about my original writing [on twitter](#).